



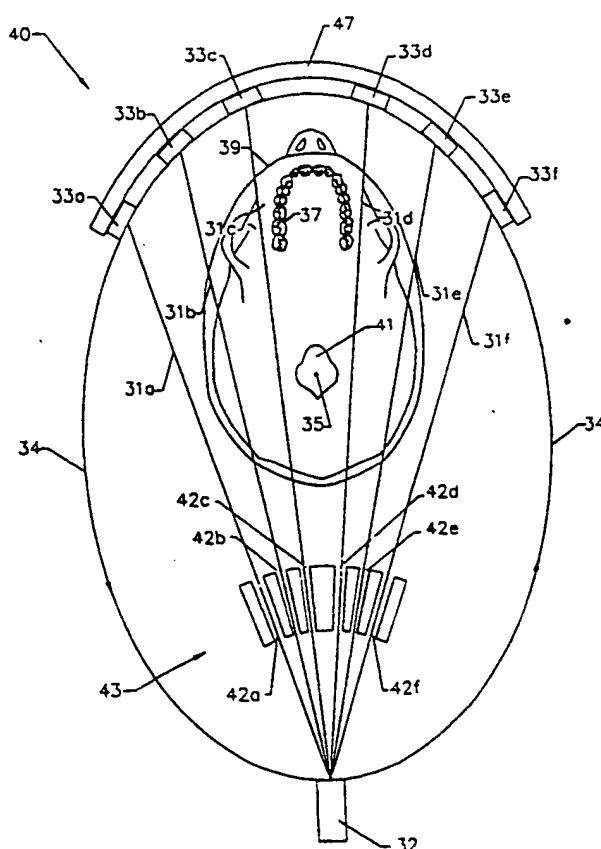
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(54) Title: THREE-DIMENSIONAL PANORAMIC DENTAL RADIOGRAPHY METHOD AND APPARATUS WHICH AVOIDS THE SUBJECT'S SPINE

(57) Abstract

A panoramic dental radiography system (40) projects multiple vertical fan-shaped radiation beams (31a-f) through a subject's teeth (37) and onto multiple detectors (33a-f) with each fan-shaped beam (31a-f) avoiding the subject's spine (41). The radiographic source (32) and radiographic detectors (33a-f) are rotated about a vertical axis (35), so that the detected radiation may be tomographically processed to produce a panoramic image of the teeth (37). The multiple vertical fan-shaped radiation beams (31a-f) are projected on either side of the spine (41), to reduce the radiographic dosage to the spine (41) and to prevent the spine (41) from blurring the panoramic radiograph. The resulting multiple projections can be tomosynthetically processed to produce a three-dimensional image of tissues of diagnostic interest, free of image artifacts produced by irradiation of the spine (41).



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THREE-DIMENSIONAL PANORAMIC DENTAL RADIOGRAPHY METHOD AND APPARATUS WHICH AVOIDS THE SUBJECT'S SPINE

Field of the Invention

This invention relates to radiographic imaging and more particularly to dental radiographic imaging.

5

Background of the Invention

Tomography is an analog imaging process which is widely used for radiographic imaging. In tomography, an x-ray beam source and an x-ray film are moved in predetermined directions relative to one another, such that the fulcrum of relative movement between the source and the film defines a region of interest. Since relative movement at the fulcrum is zero, this region is projected unchanged onto the film. The radiographic projections of all tissues lying outside this region move during exposure, so that they appear more or less blurred depending on their distance from the fulcrum. The amount of blur is directly proportional to their distance from the fulcrum. Accordingly, the region or fulcrum is often referred to as the "focal plane".

In summary, the tomographic process capitalizes on the angular disparity produced by relative motion between x-ray source and x-ray detector to selectively isolate a region, the location of which

can be varied by controlling motion relative to the tissues of interest. In tomographic imaging, linear motion of the source and detectors may be used ("linear tomography") or circular motion of the source and 5 detector may be used ("circular tomography"). Depending upon the diagnostic task, other more complex motions may be used, such as hypercycloidal motion ("hypercycloidal tomography").

A related but computationally distinct 10 imaging process for obtaining tomographic "slices" is computed tomography. In computed tomography, the projection geometry is characterized by a fan-shaped x-ray beam which lies in the same plane as a detector. This geometry renders details in one focal plane 15 independent from those in another focal plane, but at the expense of having the plane of the source and detector motion coincident with the focal plane.

Linear tomography has been used in dental radiography to obtain images of individual teeth or 20 groups of teeth. Computed tomography also has been used in dental radiography to obtain a slice through a subject's head, parallel to the plane of the subject's teeth.

In the above description, and in the 25 description to follow, reference is made to the "plane of the teeth", which is defined as the plane formed by the intersection of a subject's upper and lower teeth. This plane, which is parallel to the plane of the jaw, is typically a horizontal plane when the subject is in 30 a normal upright (standing or sitting) position. Accordingly, the term "horizontal" will be used to refer to a direction parallel to the plane of the teeth, which is typically a horizontal plane. The term 35 "vertical" will be used to refer to a direction perpendicular to the plane of the teeth, which is generally parallel to a subject's spine, and is

vertical when the subject is in the typical upright position.

The process of tomography has been extended to digital tomosynthesis, which produces a series of 5 discrete images taken from different positions as the x-ray source and detector move about a fixed fulcrum. Each discrete image corresponds to a different relative position of the source and film plane, rather than a single image produced continuously. In linear 10 tomography and linear tomosynthesis the source and the detector move in a straight line about a fulcrum lying in the tissues which define the plane to be seen sharply in the reconstruction.

It has been shown that the tomosynthetic 15 process is theoretically indistinguishable from the tomographic process, provided that the size of the smallest detail of interest can be specified and the number of discrete projections is sufficiently large. These processes are indistinguishable because they both 20 operate by isolating a focal plane through a controlled blur as described above. However, tomosynthesis has an advantage over tomography, because simple manipulation of the radiographic intensity data obtained from the multiple images permits the position of the focal plane 25 to be adjusted after the fact. Accordingly, a computer can be used to selectively search through the multiple images and to render the image of a particular structure of interest in proper focus, irrespective of its location.

30 The theoretical and practical designs of a tomosynthetic x-ray system are well known to those having skill in the art, and are described, for example, in an article entitled *Tomosynthesis: A Three-Dimensional Radiographic Imaging Technique* by D. 35 G. Grant, published in the IEEE Transactions on Bio-Medical Engineering, Vol. BME-19, No. 1, January, 1972, pp. 20-28. The present inventor likewise has

coauthored a number of articles describing computer tomosynthesis. See the articles entitled *Computerized Tomosynthesis of Dental Tissues*, coauthored with Groenhuis and Ruttimann, published in *Oral Surgery*, 5 Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 206-214, August, 1983; *A Prototype Digital Tomographic X-Ray System For Dental Applications* coauthored with Groenhuis and Ruttimann, published in the *IEEE International Symposium on Medical Images and Icons*, July 24-27, 1984, pp. 218-10 221; *Restoration of Digital Multiplane Tomosynthesis By a Constrained Iteration Method*, coauthored with Ruttimann and Groenhuis, published in the *IEEE Transactions on Medical Imaging*, Vol. MI-3 September, 1984, pp. 141-148; and *Synthesis of Arbitrary X-ray 15 Projections from a Finite Number of Existing Projections* coauthored with Ruttimann, Groenhuis and Edholm, published in *Society of Photo-optical Instrumentation of Engineers, Application of Optical Instrumentation in Medicine XIII*, Vol. 535, pp. 84-90, 20 1985.

Panoramic dental radiography is also widely used for dental imaging. In contrast with conventional single tooth exposures, panoramic dental radiography attempts to "unwrap" the curved jaw and teeth into a 25 flat panoramic image. In other words, panoramic dental radiography is a unique imaging technique for showing all of the teeth and related dental tissues on a single exposed film in one "panoramic sweep". It results from a system that dynamically alters the swept projection 30 using an exposure geometry that establishes foci that are different in the horizontal and vertical directions.

Panoramic radiography resembles linear tomography to the extent that it produces images 35 characterized by a region of sharp focus that is controlled by the motion of the x-ray beam and the x-ray film relative to the irradiated tissues. However,

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unlike tomography the image is produced from a fan-shaped x-ray beam which scans across a moving film as the source of radiation moves in a complicated path around the patient's head. The result is an image 5 which shows relatively sharp images of the teeth unwrapped from the dental arch, but buried in blurred images of other tissues laying further away from the region of interest.

Panoramic radiography involves horizontal 10 rotation of a single fan-shaped x-ray beam and an x-ray detector, such as a photographic plate, about an axis which is generally parallel to the subject's spine and orthogonal to the plane of the teeth. The single fan-shaped beam is a vertical beam, which extends 15 orthogonal to the plane of the teeth. In contrast with tomography, the x-ray film is also moved relative to the x-ray beam, at a constant velocity which is synchronized to the rotation of the x-ray source and film. In the limit (i.e. when the fan-shaped beam is 20 infinitely thin), this movement places the effective tomographic fulcrum at infinity, thus precluding all tomographic blur. On the other hand, by increasing the thickness of the fan-shaped beam, it is possible to introduce more and more tomographic blurring into the 25 resulting panoramic radiograph, to render sharp only the image of structures lying a focal plane determined by the relative movement of the source and detector.

In summary, panoramic radiography sweeps an extended film with a modulated fan-shaped beam to 30 produce an extended image with a lateral extent and projective attributes impossible to produce directly from a single exposure. The degree to which the unwanted out-of-plane structures are tomographically blurred is determined by the horizontal width of the 35 fan beam as it is projected onto the moving film, and by the relative movement of the x-ray source and projected tissues relative to the plane of the fulcrum.

Taken together, these processes result in an imaging system that permits the teeth to be viewed tomographically in spite of the fact that they lie in an arched arrangement inside the head.

5 Panoramic radiography systems are described in U.S. Patents 4,589,122 to Nieminen entitled *Panoramic Tomography X-ray Apparatus*; 4,783,793 to Virta et al. entitled *X-ray Apparatus for Panoramic Tomography Including Control System*; 4,847,881 to 10 Heubeck entitled *Dental X-ray Diagnostics Installation For Producing Panoramic Tomograms of the Jaw of a Patient*; and 4,878,234 to Pheiffer et al. entitled *Dental X-ray Diagnostics Installation for Producing Panorama Slice Exposures of the Jaw of a Patient*.

15 Although useful for producing panoramic images of a subject's teeth, known panoramic dental radiographic systems possess a number of shortcomings. For example, the usefulness of dental panoramic radiography depends greatly on the degree to which the 20 structures of interest lie close to the focal plane. If the region of relative lack of blur is too wide, structures other than teeth and jaws also appear sharp, and obscure details of the structure of diagnostic interest. Hence, in order to prevent unwanted features 25 from appearing clearly, tomographic blurring typically is adjusted to render only images quite near the focal plane in relative focus. Unfortunately, such a design makes the system highly sensitive to subject positioning. If the subject is not positioned 30 properly, the dental structures of interest may not be present in the region of clear tomographic focus, so that the image of important diagnostic details becomes blurred.

35 A particular problem related to dental panoramic radiography stems from the fact that the images of unwanted structures outside the region of clear focus are only blurred, rather than being

eliminated completely. Accordingly, a large diffuse structure is less influenced by the blurring process than a small, sharply delineated tissue detail. This is a particular problem in dental panoramic radiography 5 because the vertical fan-shaped x-ray beam passes through the spine. The midline position of the spine has heretofore precluded x-ray projections which avoid the spine.

The need to pass an x-ray beam through the 10 spine in a dental radiographic applications, produces two deleterious effects. First, it requires a higher x-ray dose than would otherwise be required, in order to provide sufficient x-ray density at the teeth after passing through the spine. Moreover, it produces a 15 large massive blur on the x-ray film which often obscures structures of interest.

Yet another problem with conventional panoramic radiographic systems is the overlap of the teeth in the panoramic radiograph. This overlap takes 20 place because the x-rays are not always directed between the proximal surfaces of the teeth. Accordingly, the interproximal regions of a number of teeth typically overlap in the panoramic radiograph, thereby obscuring necessary details.

25 It is known that multiple beams can be produced from a single x-ray source, using a suitable x-ray collimator. See U.S. Patent 4,264,824 to Tosswill entitled *Far Field Imaging*, which describes a collimator for use in imaging far field sources, and 30 U.S. Patent 4,304,999 to Richey et al. entitled *Eccentric Source Collimator Assembly for Rotating Source CT Scanner*. Multiple beams, which may be produced by collimating a single x-ray source, may be used in multiple beam computer tomography as described 35 in U.S. Patent 4,315,157 to Barnes entitled *Multiple Beam Computed Tomography (CT) Scanner*. It is also known to use at least two fan-shaped beams having

different energy spectra which are obtained from a single x-ray source to produce several negatives or exposures of a single area or zone, and to superpose these exposures, as described in U.S. Patent 4,731,807 5 to Plessis et al. entitled *X-ray Examination Apparatus*.

Finally, it is also known to obtain panoramic dental x-ray images from multiple diverging fan-shaped beams, which extend orthogonal to the plane of the teeth, by synchronously rotating the fan-shaped beams, 10 and corresponding detectors, about an axis orthogonal to the plane of the teeth. See U.S. Patent 4,481,650 to Kinanen. Five vertical fan-shaped beams are used, with one beam being a centrally located beam which passes 15 radiation through the subject's spine. The remaining beams are symmetrically arranged about the central beam.

In summary, known panoramic dental radiography techniques, which use single or multiple fan-shaped x-ray beams are highly position sensitive, 20 include excessive overlap of interproximal areas of the teeth, require higher doses, and produce interpretive artifacts due to the effects of the spine.

Summary of the Invention

It is therefore an object of the present 25 invention to provide an improved panoramic dental radiography method and apparatus.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a panoramic dental radiography method and apparatus which reduces the effect of the spine on x-ray dose and image quality. 30

These and other objects are provided, according to the present invention, by simultaneously projecting a plurality of vertical (i.e. extending orthogonal to the plane of a subject's teeth) 35 diverging, fan-shaped radiation beams through a subject's teeth, which each fan-shaped beam avoiding

the subject's spine. The attenuated radiation which emerges through the teeth is detected, with the detected attenuated radiation being free of attenuation produced by the spine. The radiographic source and 5 radiographic detector are synchronously rotated about a vertical axis (i.e. orthogonal to the plane of the subject's teeth), with each of the fan-shaped beams avoiding the spine during rotation thereof. The detected attenuated radiation produces multiple 10 panoramic images of the teeth which are free of image artifacts produced by irradiation of the spine.

According to the invention, the plurality of diverging vertical fan-shaped radiation beams pass through a subject's head, with each of the fan-shaped 15 beams avoiding the subject's spine. The fan-shaped beams pass on either side of the spine but no beam passes through the spine. Accordingly, image artifacts caused by irradiation of the spine are eliminated. Moreover, a reduced dosage results, because the primary 20 x-ray beams need not pass through the spine. Finally, exposure of the radiosensitive marrow producing spine is eliminated.

The plurality of diverging vertical fan-shaped x-ray beams may be produced by a collimated x-ray source. A linear radiation detector, such as a 25 vertical, linear Charge Coupled Device (CCD) array, may be positioned to intercept a respective one of the fan-shaped beams which emerge from the subject's head, with each of the beams avoiding the subject's spine. The 30 signals detected by the detectors may be processed as conventional panoramic data to produce a panoramic image of the teeth. The images so produced have decreased sensitivity to subject positioning and reduced interproximal overlap compared to conventional 35 panoramic images.

The images produced according to the invention may be thought of as being equivalent to that produced from a hypothetical two-step process:

- 5 1) a highly nonlinear warping transformation that opens the head from the back and flattens it out such that the teeth are oriented in a relatively straight line rather than bent into the arch-shaped configuration that they normally occupy, and
- 10 2) application of linear tomosynthesis to the resulting grossly distorted tissue mass. The desired tomosynthetic slices are produced from focal planes parallel to the now flattened plane containing the "unwrapped" teeth.

15 The invention produces reduced blurring without extreme sensitivity to subject position. The distortion and dosage effects of the spine are eliminated, and reduced interproximal overlap is provided. The invention may be practiced by modifying conventional digital tomosynthesis systems to provide multiple vertical fan-shaped beams which avoid the spine, and multiple vertical linear detector arrays, to obtain simultaneous acquisition of multiple panoramic projections, each produced at a different angle. Tomosynthetic processing may then be used to obtain three-dimensional information.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 schematically illustrates a 30 conventional computed tomographic system.

Figure 2 schematically illustrates a conventional panoramic dental radiography system.

Figure 3 schematically illustrates a tomosynthetic panoramic dental radiography system 35 according to the present invention.

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Figure 4 schematically illustrates a cross sectional view of the tomosynthetic panoramic dental radiography system of Figure 3 taken through the plane of the teeth.

5 Figure 5 schematically illustrates the mechanical configuration of the system of Figure 3.

Figures 6A and 6B illustrate alternate configurations for the detector arrays of the system of Figure 3.

10 Figure 7 illustrates a general electrical schematic diagram of the system of Figure 3.

Figure 8 illustrates a more detailed electrical schematic diagram of the electronic controller of Figure 7.

15 Figures 9A-9C illustrate the theoretical morphological transformation of a subject's head during panoramic radiographic operations.

Figures 10A and 10B illustrate irradiation of the morphologically transformed head of Figure 9C 20 during conventional panoramic radiography and during panoramic tomosynthesis underlying the present invention.

Figure 11 illustrates a general schematic diagram of an alternative embodiment of a panoramic 25 dental radiography system of the present invention.

Description of a Preferred Embodiment

The present invention now will be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which a preferred embodiment 30 of the invention is shown. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the embodiment set forth herein; rather, this embodiment is provided so that this disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will 35 fully convey the scope of the invention to those

skilled in the art. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout.

Prior to describing the panoramic radiography method and apparatus of the present invention, a 5 description of a computed tomography system will be provided, followed by a description of a conventional panoramic radiographic system. Figure 1 schematically illustrates a computed tomography system, which is oriented to obtain a slice through the head, including 10 the plane of the teeth. As shown, computed tomography system 10 projects a single, horizontal fan-shaped x-ray beam 11 from a source 12 to a linear detector array 13. The x-ray source 12 and virtual linear detector array 13 are rotated in a horizontal rotation path 14, 15 without translational movement between the source 12 and the detector 13. Horizontal rotation typically takes place about a vertical axis 15 which is centered near the spine of the subject 19.

In circular tomography, the detector array 13 20 would be replaced by an x-ray film cassette, and the rotation is typically a continuous rotation. In computed tomography, multiple discrete line integrals are produced, each corresponding to a different relative position of the source and detector, rather 25 than a continuous tomographic reproduction.

Tomography and tomosynthesis both rely on the blurring of unwanted details which are outside the region of sharp focus. However, tomosynthesis possesses a unique advantage over tomography because 30 simple manipulation of data obtained from the multiple images permits the position of the focal plane to be adjusted after the fact. In particular, a computer can be used to selectively search through multiple images and render the image of a particular structure of 35 interest in proper focus, regardless of its particular location. Moreover, the projection geometry responsible for the blurs, at any distance from the

focal plane, is known in advance. Accordingly, the exact nature of the blurring process produced by unwanted structures may be predicted with certainty. This means that deconvoluting algorithms may be used to 5 further suppress blur resulting from structures lying outside the focal plane.

Referring now to Figure 2, a schematic illustration of a panoramic radiography system is shown. System 20 includes an x-ray source 22 which 10 projects a single, vertical, fan-shaped x-ray beam 21 onto an x-ray film 23. A slit collimator 26 may be used to reduce the effects of unwanted radiation. The source 22 and film 23 are rotated about horizontal rotation path 24 centered about a moving vertical axis 15 25, typically located anterior to typically the spine of the subject 29. In contrast with the tomosynthetic system of Figure 1, there is relative motion between the source 22 and film 23. The relative motion is synchronized with the rotational movement of the source 20 22 and film 23 about axis 25. Accordingly, an extended film 23 is swept with a modulated fan-shaped beam to produce an extended image with a lateral extent and projective attributes impossible to produce directly from a single exposure.

25 Although the system of Figure 2 is widely used for panoramic dental radiography, it has been found that this system is highly sensitive to subject positioning. Also, the beam passes through the subject's spine, which contributes to the x-ray dose so 30 that it is higher than would ordinarily be required for imaging the teeth and jaw. Moreover, the spine creates a blurred artifact on the panoramic image which often interferes with proper diagnosis.

In the description of Figures 1 and 2, and 35 the description of the invention to follow, the terms "horizontal" and "vertical" are referenced to an upright (sitting or standing) subject 19, 29. In an

upright subject, the systems 10, 20 are rotated horizontally, with beam 11 being a horizontal fan-shaped beam and beam 21 being a vertical fan-shaped beam. However, it will be understood by those having skill in the art that the terms "horizontal" and "vertical" are generally defined relative to the plane of the teeth, which is formed by the intersection of the upper row of teeth 17, 27 and the lower row of teeth 18, 28, and which is parallel to the bottom of the jaw. A direction parallel to the plane of the teeth is referred to as "horizontal" and a direction which is orthogonal to the plane of the teeth will be referred to as "vertical" in this description.

Referring now to Figure 3, the panoramic dental radiography system of the present invention will now be described. As shown in Figure 3, panoramic radiography system 30 includes a plurality, here six, of vertical (orthogonal to the plane of the teeth) fan-shaped diverging beams 31a-31f, produced by a source 32. The beams 31 may be produced from a single source 32 using a six-way collimator, as is well known to those having skill in the art. As also shown in Figure 3, a vertical detector array having a plurality, here six, of linear detectors 33a-33f, is positioned so that a respective one of the beams 31 impinges on a respective one of the detectors 33 after passing through the subject 39. For reference purposes, upper and lower rows of teeth 37 and 38 are also shown. As also shown, source 32 and detector 33 are rotated in a horizontal rotation path 34, about a vertical axis 35 which may run through the subject's spine.

The system of Figure 3 may be viewed as having a very narrow fan beam, resulting in a relatively wide region of sharp focus, so as to preclude significant blurring of malpositioned structures of diagnostic interest. Multiple exposures are taken at carefully selected angles, so that all

areas of diagnostic interest are seen, and not obscured by superimposed images of irrelevant tissues in at least one projection. This results in a system that is characterized by multiple panoramic scans, each 5 involving a different projection angle, to yield multiple, discrete, asymmetrical panoramic projections. By keeping track of the angles responsible for the resulting projections relative to the position of the subject, it is possible to tomosynthetically synthesize 10 the resulting two-dimensional projections into a true three-dimensional representation of the tissues.

Referring now to Figure 4, a cross-sectional view of Figure 3 taken through the plane of the teeth is shown. Figure 4 illustrates that all of the beams 15 31a-31f are projected on either side of the spine 41, throughout the 360° rotation of the system around the subject. In particular, beams 31a-31c are on one side of the spine 41 and beams 31d-31f are on the opposite side of the spine 41. The spine is thereby minimally 20 exposed to x-rays and the spine cannot act as a source for blurring the resulting image. As an example of the geometry of Figure 4, beams 31a-31f may be spaced about the centerline in increments of 6, 10 and 16 degrees respectively, with the length of each beam being 25 approximately 40 inches, and the distance from source 32 to center axis 35 being approximately 20 inches. Axis 35 may coincide with the center of spine 41 or may be placed between spine 41 and teeth 37.

The signals produced by detector arrays 33a- 30 33f may be processed tomosynthetically. However, in contrast with conventional tomosynthesis, the multiple discrete angular projections required for panoramic tomosynthetic reconstruction are generated simultaneously rather than serially. This is 35 accomplished through the use of multiple fan-shaped x-ray beams, each exposing the tissues from a different direction as the single x-ray source and multiple

detector system rotates about a fixed or moveable center.

The present invention produces a number of advantages over known panoramic dental radiography systems. The x-rays can completely avoid the spine, so that no primary radiation reaches the radiosensitive marrow space in the spine. Moreover, projective artifacts of the spine do not find their way into the multiple panoramic images which are produced. Finally, the dose may be reduced because the x-rays are not directed through the spine.

The present invention also can differentially weight the dose distribution in the head so that it is concentrated in the tissues of diagnostic interest.

For example, referring again to Figure 4, the disk shaped region defined by the sector between beams 31c and 31d, as they rotate over 360°, is not exposed to any radiation dosage. The annular region between beams 31b and 31c (and 31d and 31e) is exposed to two beams as these beams rotate. The annular region between beams 31a and 31b (and beams 31e and 31f) is exposed to four beams. The remaining annular region is exposed to a total of six beams. Accordingly, the system tends to reduce and equalize the maximum intensity distribution of the x-rays.

The present invention produces multiple projections, at least one of which is likely to open most of the points of interproximal contact between the teeth. As is well known to those having skill in the art, it is desirable for a radiography system to allow points of interproximal contact between the teeth to be accurately viewed.

The panoramic image may be obtained by the present invention without the precise subject placement heretofore required. Finally, since theory and existing software have demonstrated that tomosynthetic data can be processed into any desired two-dimensional

projection, tissue changes can be quantitatively obtained from careful comparison of existing panoramic radiographs and those produced according to the present invention.

5 The present invention can utilize well known commercially available components to achieve improved results. In particular, a conventional source 32 such as contained on a model Panex-E1 machine, marketed by Morita Corporation, and a customized multi-slit
10 collimator may be used to produce the multiple vertical fan-shaped beams. A plurality of detectors, such as six model THX 1089 linear x-ray detectors, marketed by Thompson CSF, may be used to detect the radiation. This device is a 4½ inch linear array of 1000 CCD
15 elements.

 In contrast with conventional radiography of Figure 2, relative movement between detectors 33 and source 32 is not necessary, so that mechanical synchronization is not required. The signals from the
20 detectors 33 may be processed using conventional tomographic processing steps, so that new processing algorithms need not be developed, and known tomosynthetic enhancement techniques may be used. For example, Computer correction of artifacts such as
25 variations in contrast and differential magnifications, and computer pattern recognition techniques may be used. The electronic images produced may be transmitted from one computer to another, facilitating communications for diagnostic and forensic purposes.

30 Referring now to Figure 5, a simplified schematic illustration of the mechanical configuration of the system 30 of the present invention will now be described. As shown, x-ray source 32 and collimator 43 are carried at one end of support arm 44, with the
35 detectors 33a-33f being mounted at the other end thereof. The detectors 33 may be mounted on a detector support 47. As shown, arm 44 is mounted for horizontal

movement about axis 35 using a motor 45 which is mounted on support member 46.

Apparatus 30 also includes subject positioning means, for positioning the subject relative 5 to the source 32 and detector array 33 to obtain the geometric relationship described in connection with Figures 3 and 4. The subject support may include a jaw support 48 mounted on a base 49, and may also include an optional skull support 51. The supports 48 and 51 10 are preferably adjustable, to permit precise positioning of a subject's head 39 relative to the apparatus 30. The detailed mechanical design may be based upon known panoramic dental x-ray systems, and need not be described herein further. For example, a 15 Panex-E machine, marketed by J. Morita Corp., Tustin, CA, may be modified.

Referring now to Figures 6A and 6B, alternate embodiments for the detectors of Figure 5 are shown. Figure 6A illustrates four detector arrays 33a'-33d', 20 each of which include a plurality (such as three) of rows of CCDs. The two-dimensional detector arrays 33' may encompass the full extent of a widened but still collimated fan-shaped beam. Accordingly, the number of independent projection angles for tomosynthetic 25 reconstruction may be multiplied by the number of rows of CCDs. The array of Figure 6A increases the flexibility of the system, which may permit tailoring the projection geometry to a specific imaging task. For example, a hybrid system may be generated which 30 anisotropically samples both at low and at high angular resolutions depending on the importance of the structures passing through the fan-shaped beams at specific rotational angles. Figure 6B illustrates a single large two-dimensional matrix of detector 35 elements 53, which provides the ultimate in flexibility.

Referring now to Figure 7, a general hardware block diagram of the apparatus 30 of the present invention will now be described. As shown, an electronic controller such as a stored program 5 microcomputer may be electrically connected to x-ray source 32, motor 45 and detector array 33, for electronically controlling x-ray generation by x-ray source 32, and the rotation of motor 45. The signals from the detector array 33 may be stored in controller 10 50 and may be processed therein as described below in connection with Figure 8. The processed signals may be transferred to a remote computer 52 for remote analysis or viewing. The image may also be projected onto a visual display 54 such as a cathode ray tube (CRT) 15 screen. The manner of connecting the elements of Figure 7 are well known to those having skill in the art and need not be described in further detail herein.

Referring now to Figure 8, a detailed description of controller 50 will now be described. As 20 shown, a plurality of signal lines 55 may connect detector array 33 to a buffer 56 in controller 50, to allow high speed parallel transmission of data. Alternatively, serial transmission over fewer lines may be provided. It will also be understood by those 25 having skill in the art that less than all of the linear arrays may be activated during a given scan, so that the depth of field around the focal plane may be altered during the process of data acquisition. This decreases the required frame buffer size, and the 30 required data transfer rates.

After appropriate storage of the signals in the buffer 56, a nonlinear transformation may be applied by transforming means 57 in order to convert the curved detector geometry of Figure 3 into the 35 equivalent of the flat detector geometry of Figure 1. Alternatively, this transformation need not be performed, and the data produced by the geometry of

Figure 3 may be directly processed tomosynthetically, as described below. Conventional tomosynthetic processing means 58 may be used to synthesize tomosynthetic slices. A conventional display converter 5 may be used to convert the tomosynthetic signals into a format for display on display 54. The design of these elements are well known to those having skill in the art and need not be described herein further.

The data produced by the geometry of Figure 3 10 may be directly processed tomosynthetically because the projection process responsible for conventional panoramic imaging is the conceptual equivalent of applying a morphological transformation to the actual head of the subject and then irradiating the resulting 15 grossly distorted tissue mass with parallel collimated x-rays as might be produced from a conventional x-ray machine. Figures 9A-9C illustrate schematically how the head 39 might be cut along line 62, and stretched to achieve this result. The arrows 63 indicate the 20 direction of the warping displacements and they also approximate the altered direction of the x-radiation as it passes through the tissues. In the limit, the arrows 63 become parallel, suggesting that a 25 conventional fixed transmission radiograph of the distorted tissue mass would produce the equivalent of a conventional panoramic radiograph.

Referring to Figure 10, instead of irradiating the distorted tissue mass with a single beam of collimated x-rays coming from a single source 30 as shown in Figure 10A, the distorted tissue mass is irradiated with multiple beams directed from multiple angles in such a way that each projection is produced independently from the others, as shown for three arbitrary angles in Figure 10B. The resulting 35 projections on x-ray films labeled 64a, 64b and 64c may be considered to be the equivalent of three (or any reasonable number) tomosynthetic component projections

so produced that need only be shifted laterally and added together to yield tomosynthetic slices which would parallel the film planes in this conceptual simulation, and which would pass through any desired 5 depth in the distorted tissue mass. The multiple fan beams of the present invention, achieve this effect simultaneously while the panoramic sweep is performed. The result is hybrid tomosynthetic component projections that may be shifted and added to yield 10 slices which when related to the undistorted head are of nonuniform thickness and are curved in a pattern which parallels the dental arch in the region of the teeth.

Referring now to Figure 11, an additional 15 aspect of the present invention is illustrated. Figure 9 illustrates the same geometrical projection as Figure 4, except that the apparatus has rotated 90° clockwise. In this position, half the beams 31d, 31e, and 31f pass through an area of no dental interest. Accordingly, to 20 minimize the subject's radiographic dosage, at least one of the beams are suppressed during a portion of the rotation thereof. In particular, a shield 61a is provided to block beams 31d, 31e and 31f in synchronism with the rotation of the apparatus. Similarly, a 25 shield 61b may be provided to block beams 31a, 31b and 31c at the appropriate times during the rotation. Shields 61a-61b may be moved in the direction shown by arrows 62a, 62b, to block one or more of the fan-shaped beams 31 when they are not imaging an area of interest. 30 Dosage is thereby reduced further without reducing the quality or resolution of the radiographic image. It will be understood by those having skill in the art that the beams may also be individually turned off at various rotational positions, rather than blocked, to 35 suppress the beams and achieve lower subject dosage.

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In the drawings and specification, there have been disclosed typical preferred embodiments of the invention and, although specific terms are employed, they are used in a generic and descriptive sense only and not for purposes of limitation, the scope of the invention being set forth in the following claims.

CLAIMS:

1. A dental radiography system comprising:
radiographic source means, for simultaneously
projecting a plurality of diverging, fan-shaped
radiation beams through a subject's teeth, each fan-
shaped beam lying in a plane which is orthogonal to the
plane of the teeth, with each fan-shaped beam avoiding
the subject's spine;
radiographic detecting means, for detecting
attenuated radiation which emerges through the teeth,
the detected attenuated radiation being free of
attenuation produced by the subject's spine; and
means for synchronously rotating said
radiographic source means and said radiographic
detecting means about an axis which is orthogonal to
the plane of the teeth, each of said fan-shaped beams
avoiding the subject's spine during rotation thereof,
such that the detected attenuated radiation produces a
panoramic image of the teeth, which is free of image
artifacts produced by irradiation of the spine.
- 20 2. The dental radiography system of Claim 1
wherein said plurality of diverging, fan-shaped beams
are symmetrically projected about the subject's spine,
and wherein each of said fan-shaped beams avoids the
subject's spine.
- 25 3. The dental radiography system of Claim 1
further comprising means for positioning a subject's
head such that said plurality of diverging fan-shaped
beams pass through the subject's teeth, lie in a plane
which is orthogonal to the plane of the subject's
teeth, and avoid the subject's spine, and said
radiographic source means and said radiographic
detecting means synchronously rotate on opposite sides
of the subject's head, about an axis which is
orthogonal to the plane of the subject's teeth, with

each of said fan-shaped beams avoiding the subject's spine during rotation thereof, such that the detected radiation produces a panoramic image of the subject's teeth which is free of image artifacts produced by 5 irradiation of the spine.

4. The dental radiography system of Claim 1 wherein said radiographic detecting means comprises a like plurality of linear radiation detectors, orthogonal to the plane of the teeth, a respective one 10 of which is positioned to intercept a respective one of the fan-shaped beams which emerge through the teeth, free of attenuation produced by the subject's spine.

5. The dental radiography system of Claim 4 wherein each linear radiation detector comprises a 15 linear array of solid state detectors, arranged in a single row orthogonal to the plane of the teeth.

6. The dental radiography system of Claim 4 wherein each linear radiation detector comprises a linear array of solid state detectors, arranged in a 20 plurality of rows orthogonal to the plane of the teeth.

7. The dental radiography system of Claim 1 wherein said radiographic detecting means comprises a two-dimensional array of solid state detectors, for intercepting all of said fan-shaped beams which emerge 25 through the teeth, free of attenuation produced by the subject's spine.

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8. The dental radiography system of Claim 1 wherein said synchronous rotating means comprises means for synchronously rotating said radiographic source means and said radiographic detecting means about an 5 axis which is orthogonal to the plane of the teeth and passes through the subject's spine.

9. The dental radiography system of Claim 1 further comprising electronic controlling means, electrically connected to said radiographic detecting 10 means, for producing a representation of a panoramic dental image from the detected attenuated radiation which emerges through the teeth.

10. The dental radiography system of Claim 1 wherein at least one of said fan-shaped beams fails to 15 pass through the teeth during a portion of its rotation about said axis, said dental radiography system further comprising means for selectively suppressing said at least one of said radiation beams during said portion of rotation thereof, to reduce the subject's radiation 20 dosage.

11. The dental radiography system of Claim 10 wherein said selective suppressing means comprises a moveable radiation shield, for selectively blocking said at least one of said radiation beams during said 25 portion of rotation thereof.

12. A dental radiography method comprising the steps of:

simultaneously projecting a plurality of diverging, fan-shaped radiation beams through a 30 subject's teeth, each fan-shaped beam lying in a plane which is orthogonal to the plane of the teeth and avoiding the subject's spine;

rotating said plurality of diverging, fan-shaped radiation beams about an axis which is orthogonal to the plane of the teeth, each of said fan-shaped beams avoiding the subject's spine during

5 rotation thereof; and

detecting attenuated radiation which emerges through the teeth, the detected attenuated radiation being free of attenuation produced by the subject's spine, to produce a panoramic image of the teeth which 10 is free of image artifacts produced by irradiation of the spine.

13. The dental radiography method of Claim 12 wherein said simultaneously projecting step comprises the step of symmetrically projecting the 15 plurality of diverging, fan-shaped beams about the subject's spine, with each of said fan-shaped beams avoiding the subject's spine.

14. The dental radiography method of Claim 12 wherein said detecting step comprises the step of 20 individually detecting each of said plurality of fan-shaped radiation beams at an individual radiation detector.

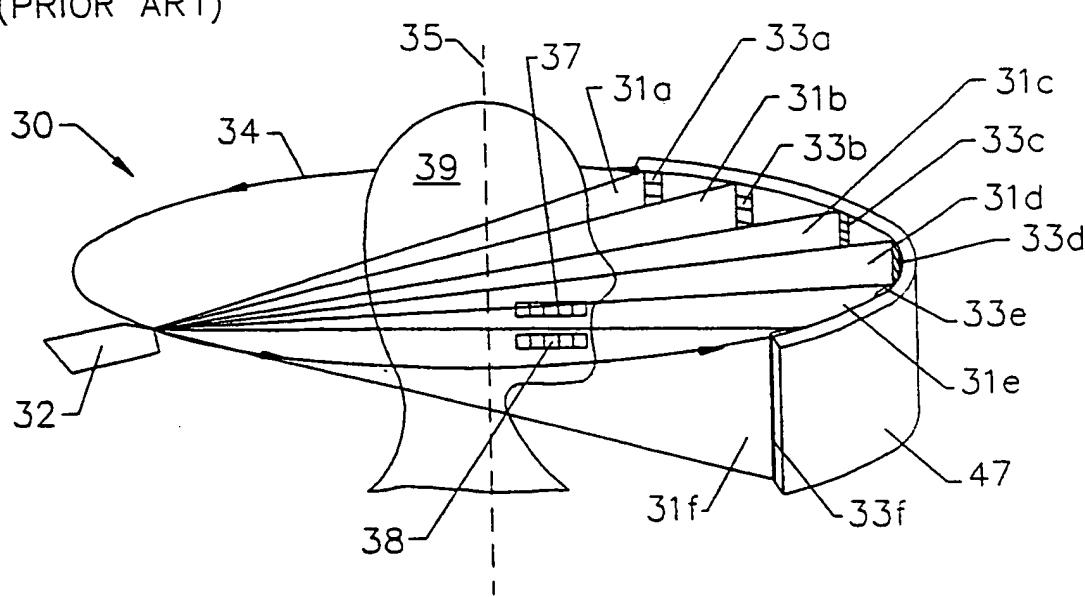
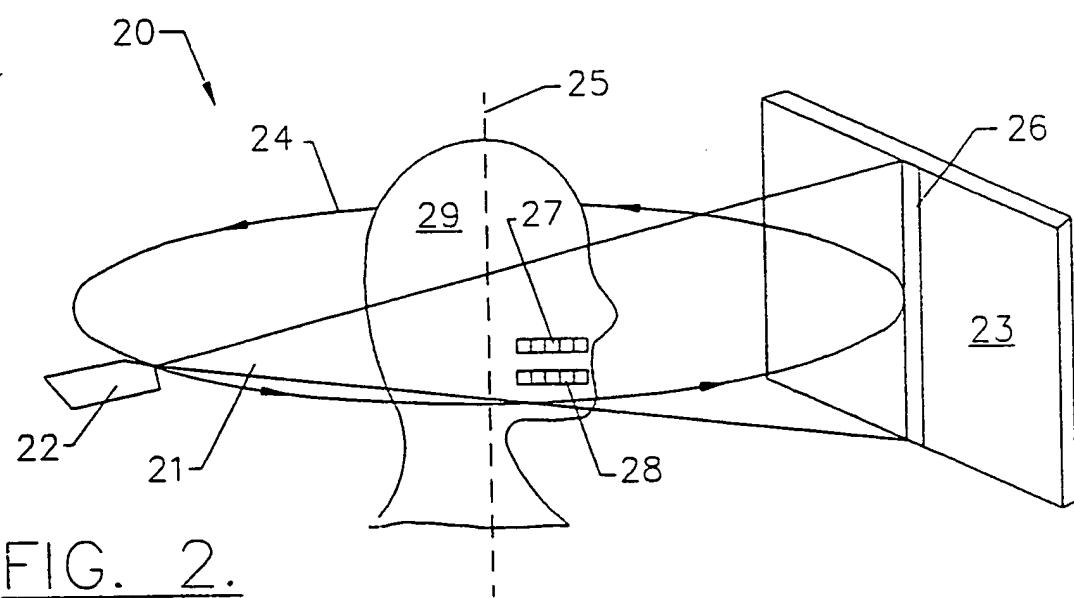
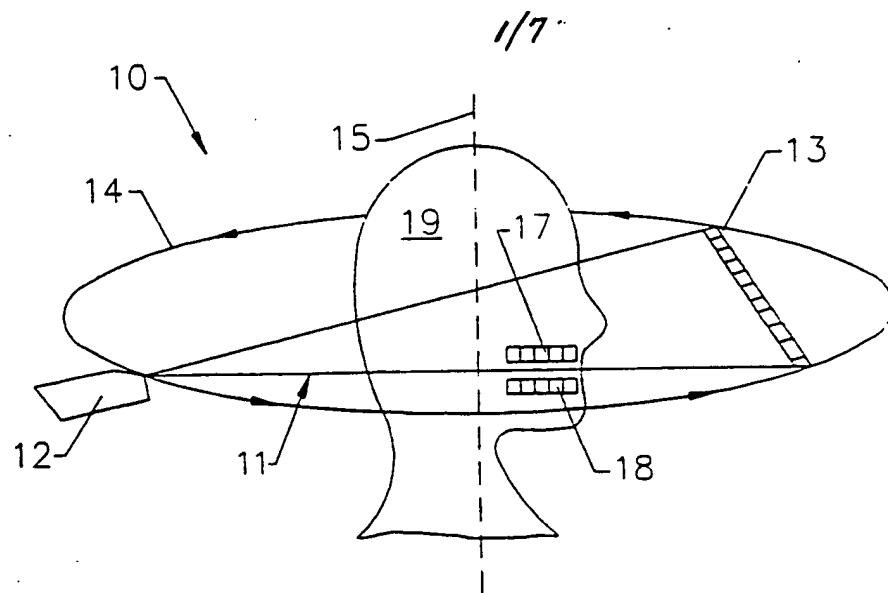
15. The dental radiography method of Claim 12 wherein said rotating step comprises the step of 25 rotating said radiographic beams about an axis which is orthogonal to the plane of the teeth and passes through the subject's spine.

16. The dental radiography method of Claim 12 further comprising the step of producing a 30 representation of a panoramic dental image from the detected attenuated radiation which emerges through the teeth, free of attenuation produced by the subject's spine.

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17. The dental radiography method of Claim
12 wherein at least one of said fan-shaped beams fails
to pass through the teeth during a portion of its
rotation about said axis, said method further
5 comprising the step of selectively suppressing said at
least one of said radiation beams during said portion
of rotation thereof, to reduce the subject's radiation
dosage.

18. The dental radiography method of Claim
10 17 wherein said selective suppressing step comprises
the step of selectively blocking said at least one of
said radiation beams during said portion of rotation
thereof.



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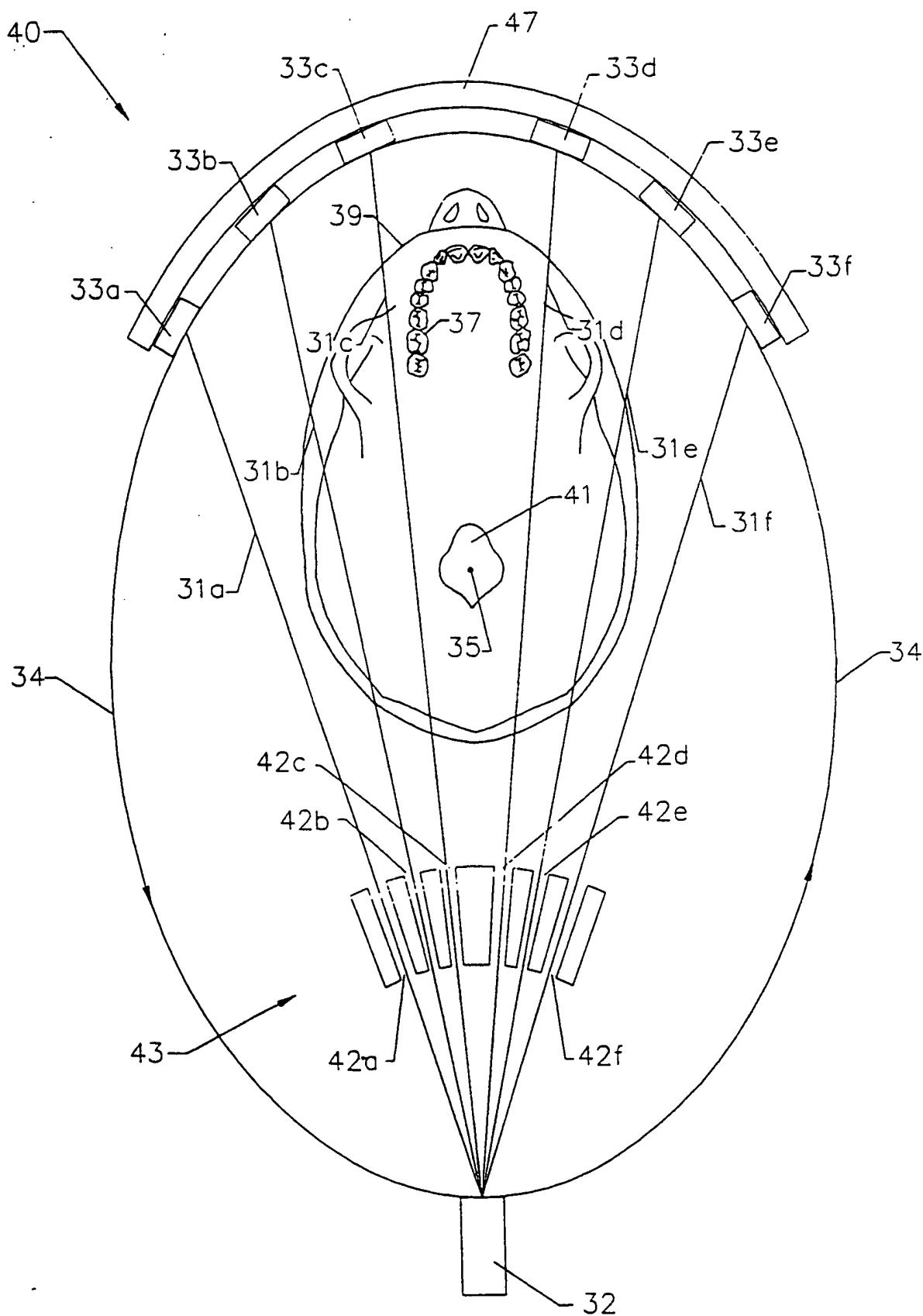


FIG. 4.

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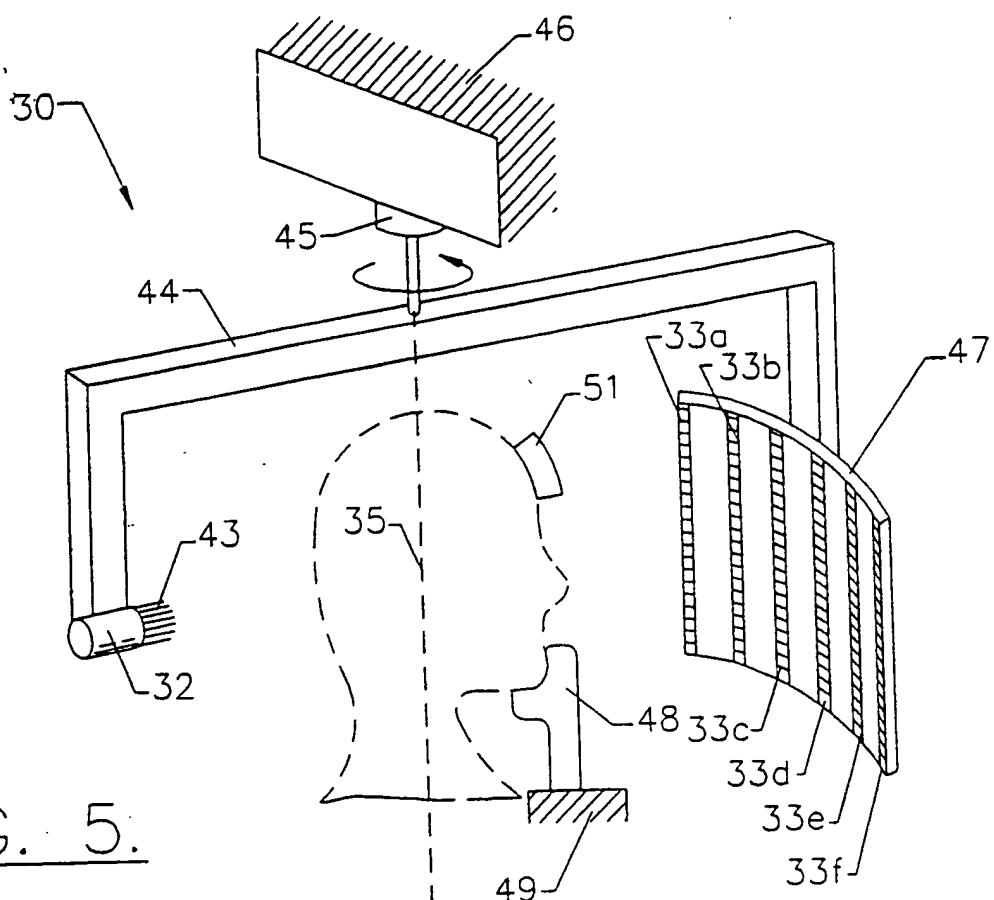


FIG. 5.

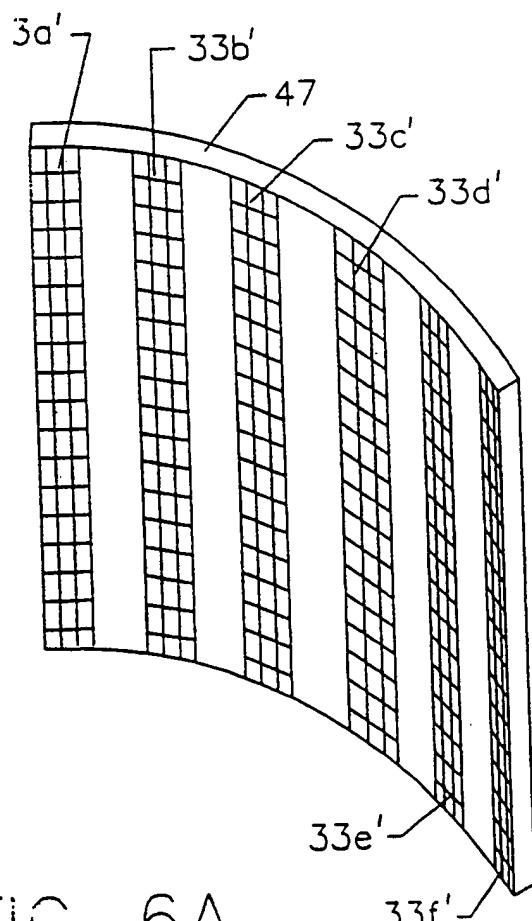


FIG. 6A.

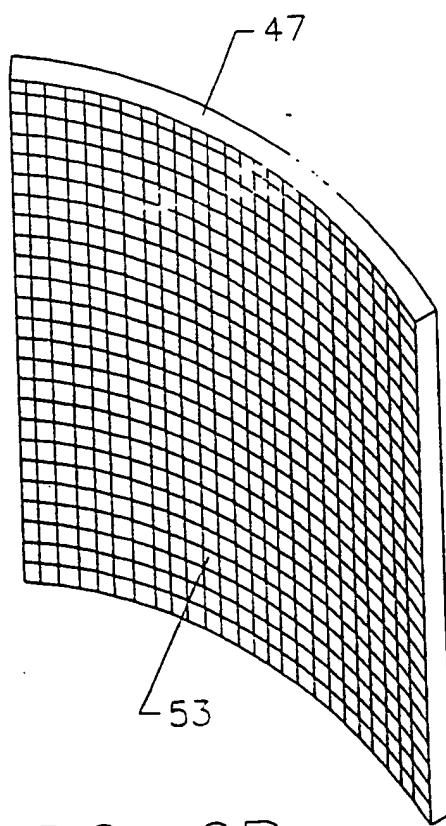


FIG. 6B.

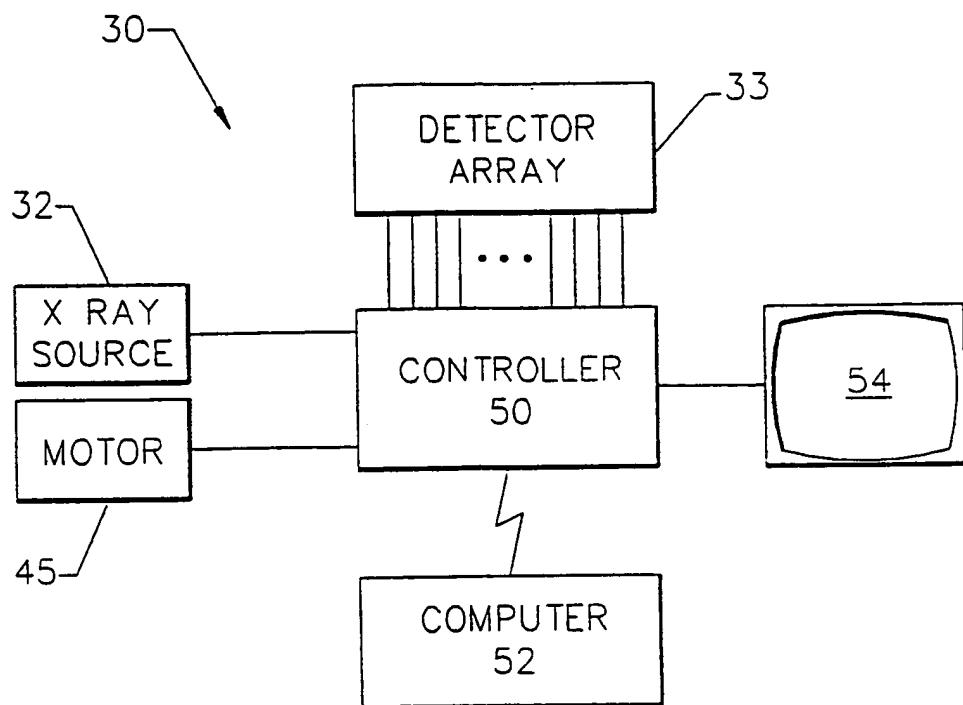


FIG. 7.

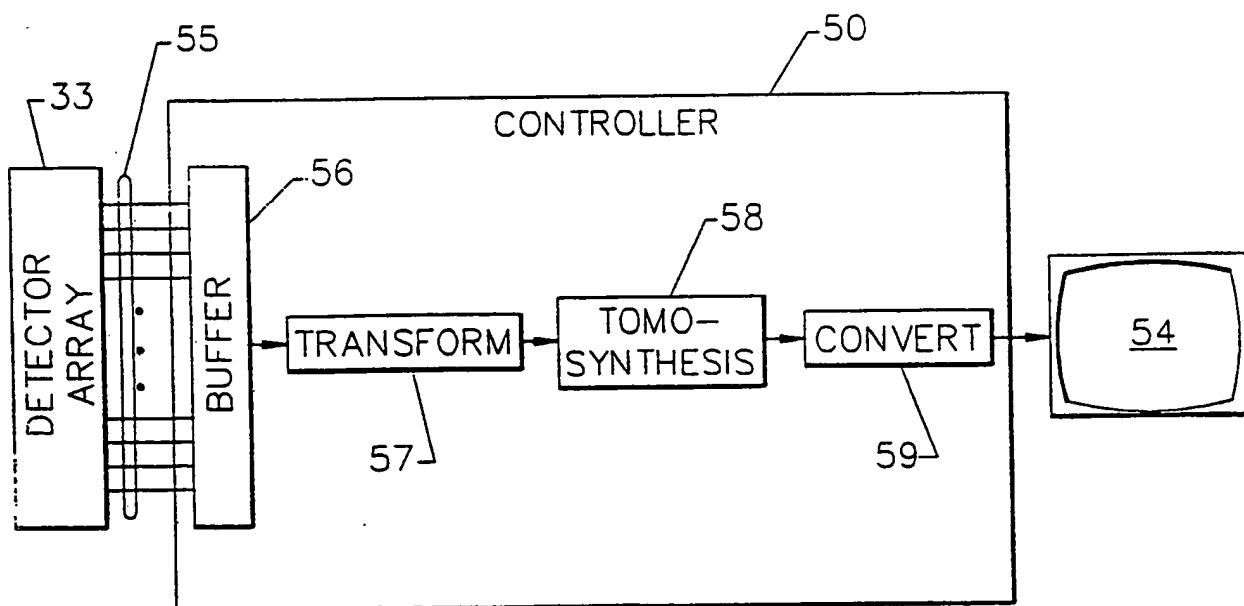
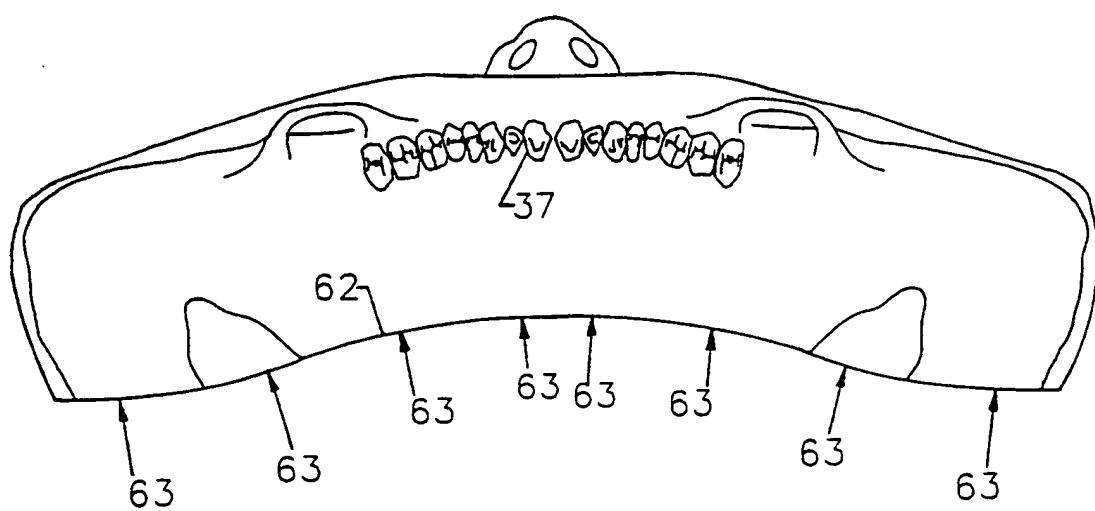
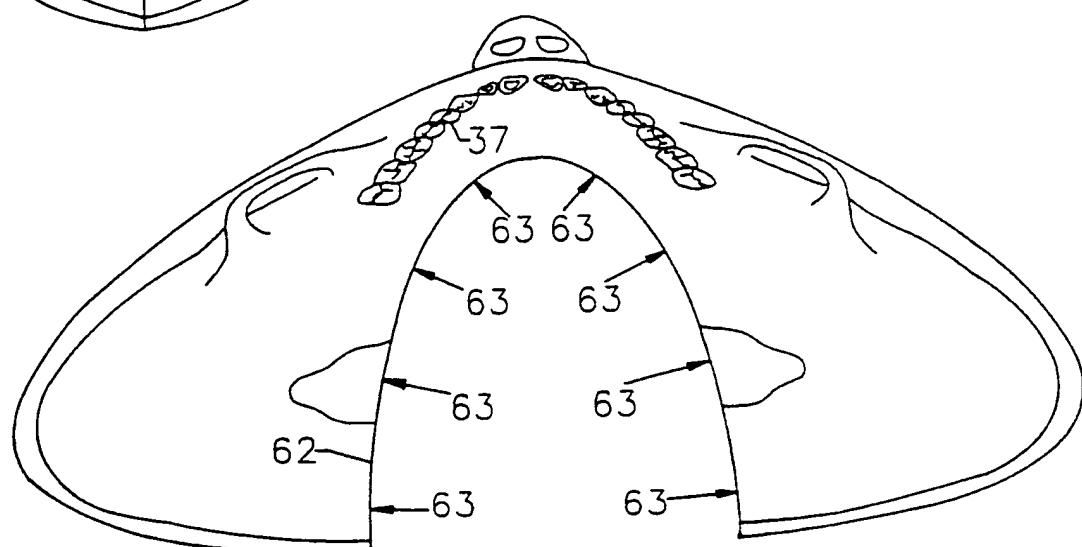
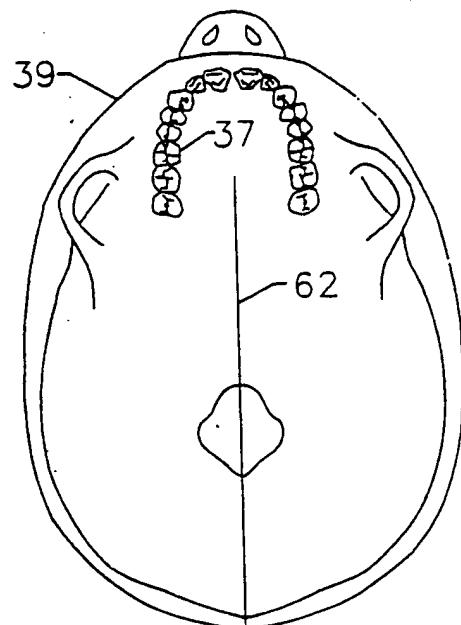


FIG. 8.



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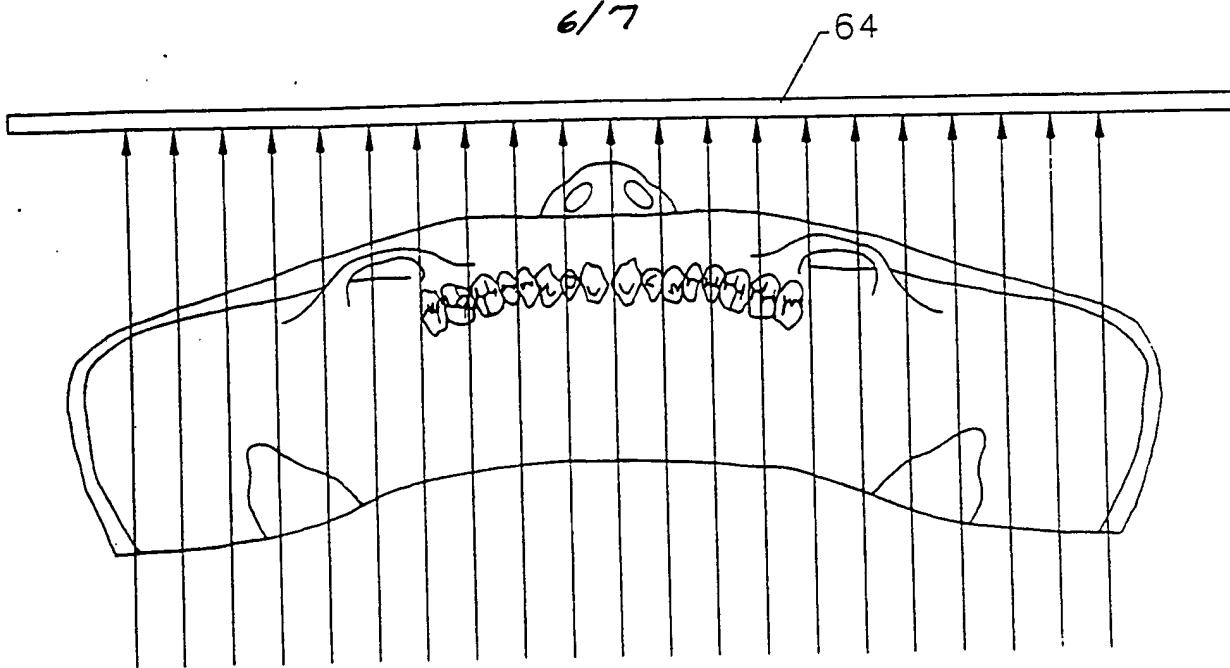


FIG. 10A.

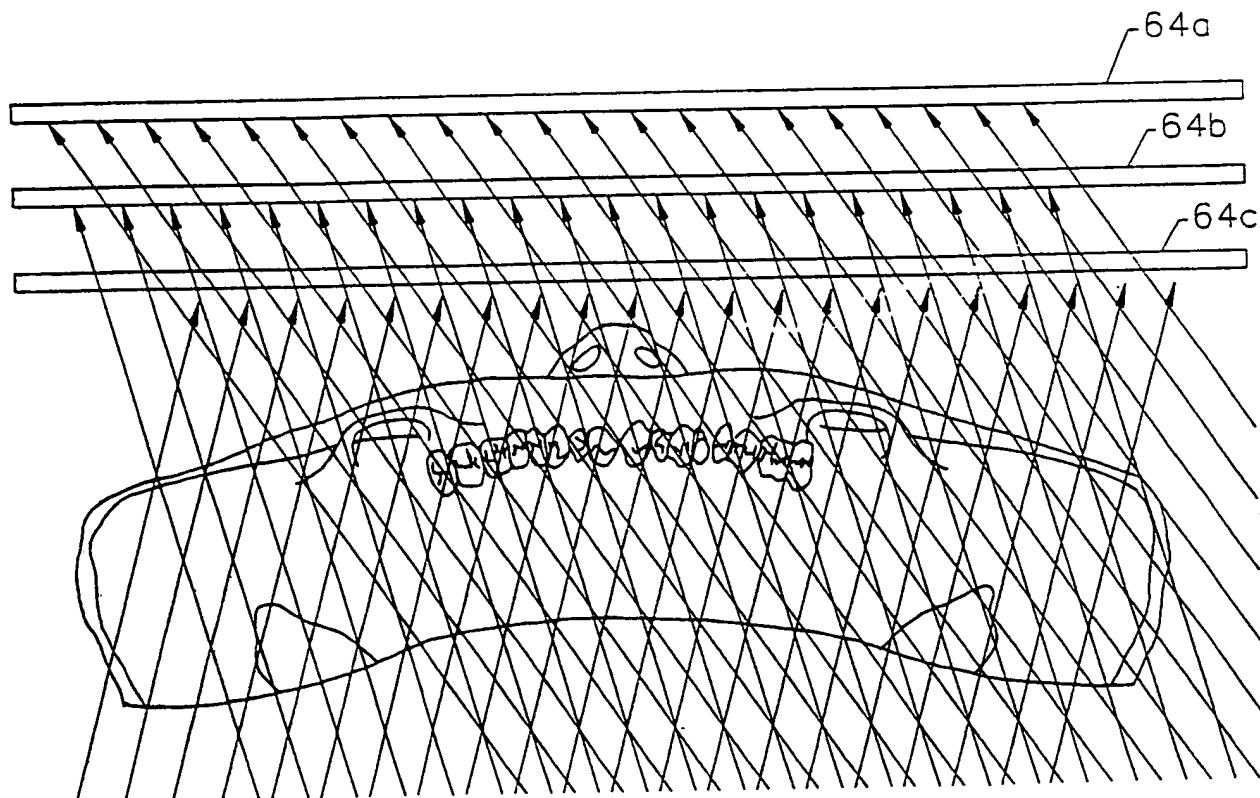


FIG. 10B.

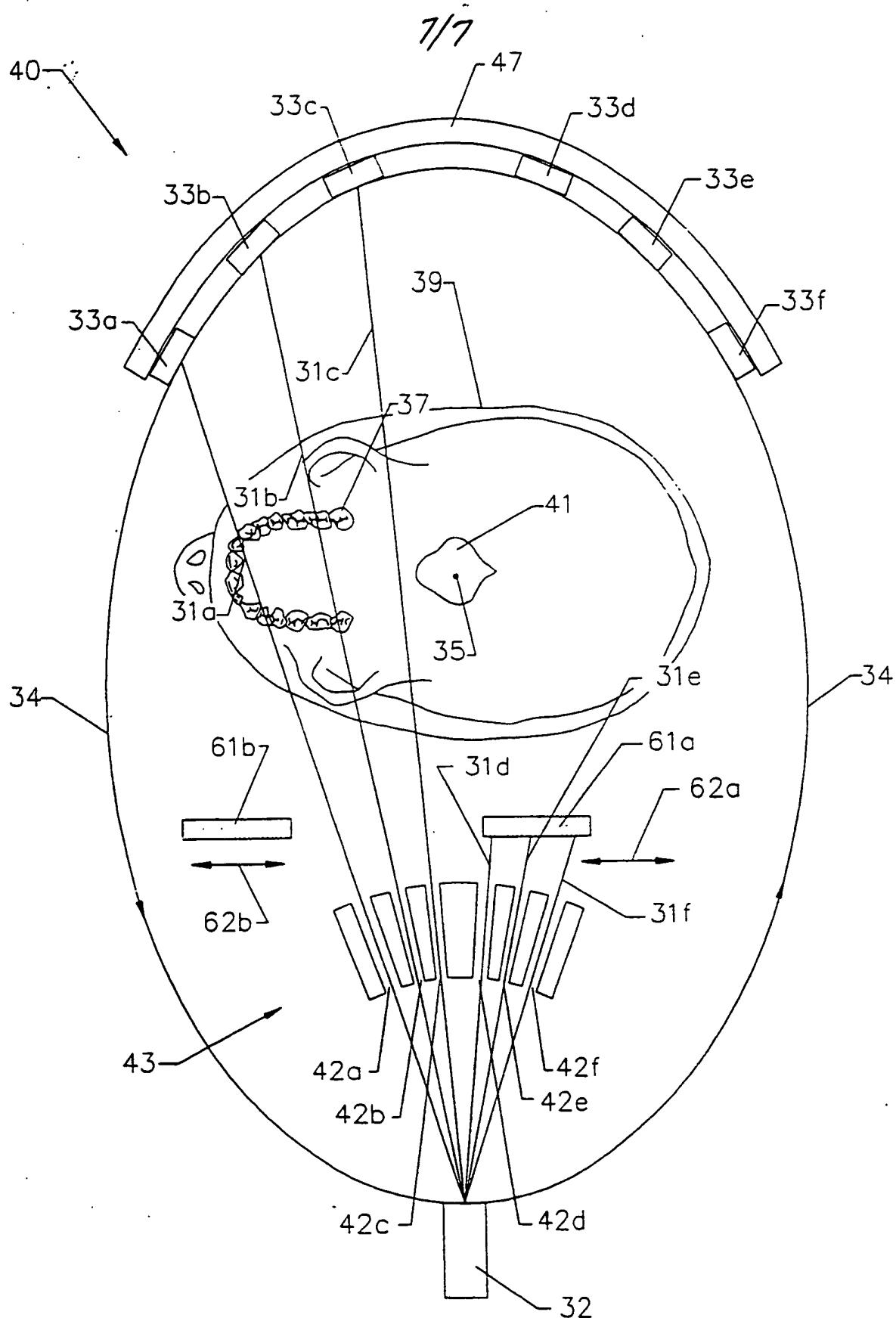


FIG. 11.

I. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER (If several classification symbols apply, indicate all)⁶

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both National Classification and IPC

Int.C1. 5 A61B6/14

II. FIELDS SEARCHEDMinimum Documentation Searched⁷

Classification System	Classification Symbols
Int.C1. 5	A61B

Documentation Searched other than Minimum Documentation
to the Extent that such Documents are Included in the Fields Searched⁸**III. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT⁹**

Category ¹⁰	Citation of Document, ¹¹ with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages ¹²	Relevant to Claim No. ¹³
A	US,A,4 481 650 (KINANEN) 6 November 1984 cited in the application see column 3, line 36 - column 6, line 27 see figures ---	1,8-12, 14-18
A	US,A,4 878 234 (PFEIFFER ET AL.) 31 October 1989 cited in the application see column 2, line 48 - column 5, line 54 see figures 1-3 ---	1,4-9, 12,14-16
A	US,A,4 304 999 (RICHEY ET AL.) 8 December 1981 cited in the application see column 3, line 54 - column 6, line 62 ---	10,11, 17,18 -/-

¹⁰ Special categories of cited documents :¹⁰^{"A"} document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance^{"E"} earlier document but published on or after the international filing date^{"L"} document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)^{"O"} document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means^{"P"} document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed^{"T"} later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention^{"X"} document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step^{"Y"} document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art.^{"Z"} document member of the same patent family**IV. CERTIFICATION**

Date of the Actual Completion of the International Search 07 APRIL 1993	Date of Mailing of this International Search Report 07.05.93
International Searching Authority EUROPEAN PATENT OFFICE	Signature of Authorized Officer CHEN A.H.

III DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		(CONTINUED FROM THE SECOND SHEET)	Relevant to Claim No.
Category ^a	Citation of Document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages		
A	US,A,3 045 118 (HOLLMAN ET AL.) 17 July 1962 see column 2, line 18 - line 49 see column 4, line 38 - column 5, line 40 see figures 1,8,9 -----		1,3,8, 12,15,16

ANNEX TO THE INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT
ON INTERNATIONAL PATENT APPLICATION NO.

US 9210615
SA 68217

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned international search report. The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on 07/04/93. The European Patent Office is in no way liable for these particulars which are merely given for the purpose of information.

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
US-A-4481650	06-11-84	DE-A- 3215280 JP-A- 57180944	23-12-82 08-11-82
US-A-4878234	31-10-89	EP-A- 0279294	24-08-88
US-A-4304999	08-12-81	None	
US-A-3045118		None	